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Ex-CIA directors oppose controls on covert actions

Washington (AP) — Former CIA Director Stansfield Turner warned a rare open session of the House Intelligence Committee yesterday that secret paramilitary operations would be scrapped if Congress had to approve them in advance.

Mr. Turner, head of the agency under President Jimmy Carter, said, "There are covert actions that would be very helpful to this country that would be ruled out if approval were involved.

"There is a perception in the intelligence community that the further a secret gets from the intelligence branch, the more likely it is to leak."

His testimony paralleled that given Tuesday by another former CIA director, William E. Colby, who predicted that if advance congressional approval were required, "no clandestine activity of that sort will ever take place."

Legislation now before the panel would give Congress the right to approve most covert paramilitary operations carried out or financed by the United States.

Representative Wyche Fowler, Jr. (D, Ga.), the bill's chief sponsor and a committee member, said covert operations that involve a military force — those covered by the bill — are few and are separate from more common intelligence-gathering activities.

One congressional source, who asked not to be named, said there were fewer than a dozen paramilitary operations a year.

Mr. Turner said Congress should monitor the effectiveness of the nation's intelligence agencies and ensure that the operations remain within proper boundaries, but said that if the Fowler bill is approved, "you're going to get mired down and lose this broader perspective."

Congressional controls were supported by two others witnesses, Birch Bayh, a former Democratic senator from Indiana and former chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, and Morton H. Halperin, director of the Center for National Security Studies.

Mr. Halperin said he strongly supported the Fowler bill but proposed that exceptions be made in situations that arise suddenly, such as the attempted rescue of U.S. hostages in Iran.

"I don't think this bill ties the president down," he said.

Mr. Bayh said of the bill, "I have no problem with that at all." He added that while presidents and CIA directors are "almost obsessed" with the view that "Congress can't be trusted, the real place you have leaks is in the executive branch."